

Afghanistan aim to stay on a roll

STAR SPORTS DESK

A high-flying Afghanistan will look to secure their entry into the Super Eights of the ICC Men's T20 World Cup as they take on Papua New Guinea (PNG) in a Group C fixture at the Brian Lara Stadium in Tarouba, Trinidad today.

Afghanistan began their campaign this time with remarkable success, beginning with a comprehensive victory over Uganda before stunning New Zealand, justifying West Indies great Brian Lara's pre-tournament prediction involving the men in blue as one of the semifinalists.

These comprehensive wins have all but secured their place in the next round, with their net run rate making their position almost impregnable -- marking a significant improvement from the 2022 edition, where they failed to secure any wins.

The key to their success this year has been their dynamic opening pair featuring Rahmanullah Gurbaz and Ibrahim Zadran. Together, they put on a 154-run partnership against Uganda and followed it up with 103



against New Zealand. Gurbaz, in particular, has been in brilliant form, scoring brisk 75-plus knocks in both matches.

However, there's a concern about the lack of match practice for their middle order, which was exposed when they lost six wickets for 55 runs following the opening stand against New Zealand. This could be a vulnerability that might encourage PNG, whose tournament has so far been a tale of missed opportunities.

Despite not having won a match yet, PNG has shown they can punch above their weights. They fought valiantly against West Indies, giving a

scare to the co-hosts in a defence of 136. It was followed by a disappointing performance against Uganda in a low-scoring affair but they made their counterparts struggle to chase a paltry 78-run target.

PNG's main issue has been a fragile batting lineup, leading to captain Assad Vala stressing on the batters to "take chances", and their misery could sustain against Afghanistan's potent bowling attack comprising an impressive spin arsenal led by captain Rashid Khan. In this tournament, however, it's been the new-ball prowess of Fazalhaq Farooqui that has paved the way for their victories, dismantling the opposition early and allowing the spinners to dominate.

However, the sluggish conditions in Tarouba could be a great equaliser. Although Afghanistan's skills are well-suited to these conditions, PNG's array of medium-pacers and spinners will be eager to make an impact. Additionally, they might find an unexpected ally in New Zealand fans, who are hoping for an upset to keep their own team's Super Eight hopes alive.



Even though there were a lot of reservations regarding picking the USA -- a country where cricket comes way below the pecking order in terms of popular sports -- as one of the hosts for the ongoing T20 World Cup, an outpouring of native supporters was seen during their group fixture against India in New York on Wednesday. At times the cheers from the USA fans in the stand of the Nassau County International Cricket Stadium drowned out the Indian fans' noise -- scaling above 120 dB as shown by broadcasters. The USA suffered a seven-wicket defeat against India, a cricketing powerhouse. But their impressive performance so far leaves them on the brink of making history by securing a Super Eight spot in their maiden T20 World Cup, giving the fans more reasons to rally behind their team.

PHOTO: AFP

Gamechangers pave WI's path to Super 8s

SPORTS REPORTER

Co-hosts West Indies have muscled their way into the Super Eights phase of the ICC T20 World Cup with three wins on the trot in Group C, riding on a couple of crucial innings from their stacked batting line-up which has no shortage of gamechangers.

The Caribbean side defeated New Zealand by 13 runs in Trinidad yesterday, a win that was orchestrated by the calculated late assault of Sherfane Rutherford, who remained unbeaten on 68 off 39 balls, with 37 of those runs coming in the final two overs.

The West Indies were stuttering on 112-9 after 18 overs when Rutherford began his carnage, hitting three sixes off Daryl Mitchell in the 19th and a couple of fours and a maximum against Mitchell Santner in the 20th, powering West Indies to 149-9, a score that proved too much for New Zealand.

However, this wasn't the first time the West Indies found themselves in a tricky situation in the ongoing tournament and were rescued by a brilliant solo batting effort.

The co-hosts were at risk of getting stunned by Papua New Guinea in the tournament opener. Chasing a measly 137, they were five down and needed 31 runs off the last three overs.

But all fears disappeared thanks to Roston Chase (42 off 27), who struck four fours and a six in the next two overs to take the West Indies home with an over to spare.

West Indies entered the tournament as one of dark horses thanks to the abundance of power hitters in their line up and so far, the co-hosts have lived up to their reputation and will begin the next phase as a serious contender for the unheralded third title.



USA on brink of history

AGENCIES

USA have a golden opportunity to make history when they take on Ireland in Florida today in their final T20 World Cup group stage fixture.

With four points in the bag, courtesy of wins against Pakistan and Canada, USA, playing their first T20 World Cup, can seal a Super 8 spot -- alongside India -- with a win against Ireland who are yet to register a point in the tournament.

The win will end qualification hopes for Pakistan, Canada, and Ireland as it will take Monank Patel's side to six points, two more than what the aforementioned sides can hope to get.

After producing one of the best batting displays of the tournament so far to clinch their opening fixture against Canada, USA stunned Pakistan in a Super Over thriller and pushed India deep in their seven-wicket defeat. The co-hosts will undoubtedly fancy themselves against Ireland who have languished at the bottom of the table following losses against India and Canada.

Ireland have won only one of their last six T20 World Cup matches -- a five-run win against England in the 2022 edition. Since then they lost five on the trot.

The two sides have met twice in the T20I format, with each team winning once. USA also won their first match in the format against Ireland in 2021.

USA will take a lot of positives from the way they handled



themselves against India. Despite an underwhelming batting effort which saw them post 110 for eight, USA came back strongly with the ball, courtesy of in-form pacer Saurabh Netravalkar who struck in his first two overs to remove Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma. Ali Khan castled Rishabh Pant to leave India three down for 39 in the eighth over but an unbeaten 72-run stand between Suryakumar Yadav (50 off 49) and Shivam Dube (31 off 35) guided India to victory.

USA were also at a disadvantage when they became the first side to be penalised five runs under the new stop-clock rules.

A team is penalised if after two warnings they still take more than a minute between overs.

On Wednesday, the US were

penalised at the start of the 16th over and instead of needing 35 runs off 30 balls to reach their 111-run target, India's task became 30 off 30 deliveries instead.

"We had a few warnings in earlier games, and it's something we do talk about to get through faster between the overs," USA coach Stuart Law said.

Despite the penalty, Law said the five-run sanction would not have impacted the outcome of the Group A clash.

"Five runs wasn't going to affect the outcome of the game," added Law.

"The players know the rule, but it's something that if you haven't played with it for a long time, it's very difficult to have it embedded in your brain."

'Approach and attitude': Booters' bright takeaways

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh's qualifying campaign of the FIFA World Cup 2026 left little room for an optimistic postmortem, but forward Rakib Hossain reckons that the men in red and green have shown improvement in two aspects: a never-say-die "attitude" and "approach" in playing a comparative attacking brand of football than before.

The charges of Javier Cabrera returned home from Qatar yesterday after drawing curtains in Tuesday's 4-0 loss to Lebanon, leaving them with a solitary point from six Group I encounters in the second round.

Although an encouraging show in 2023 SAFF Championship had expectations escalated, Bangladesh conceding a whopping 20 goals quantified a lacklustre campaign.

Moreover, they displayed a polarising performance in their home and away fixtures -- significantly worse in the latter since they only allowed four goals in home fixtures -- against vastly superior opponents in Australia, Palestine and Lebanon. For Rakib, "a change of team attitude

has been the biggest achievement" despite unfavourable outcomes.

"Our target was to finish third, but silly mistakes made us suffer," Rakib said.

The 25-year-old forward believes that Bangladesh could rectify mistakes if they get to play much stronger oppositions on a regular basis, especially abroad where the playing field offers a faster pace than familiar conditions at home.

Rakib, however, remains hopeful that "something good awaits" his side in upcoming SAFF Championship and Asian Cup Qualifiers.



Christian Pulisic fires a low free-kick past Alisson as the U.S. held Brazil to a 1-1 draw in a friendly in Orlando on Wednesday in a final tune-up for both sides ahead of the Copa America. Following a goal from Real Madrid forward Rodrygo in the 17th minute, Pulisic helped the U.S. draw level and avoid a defeat against the record five-time world champions for only the second time in 20 matches.

PHOTO: AFP

Chance to jump-start the German machine

REUTERS, Berlin

Germany begin their quest for a first major title in a decade as the Euro 2024 hosts play their Group A opener against Scotland on Friday to kick off the tournament and what the country hopes will be a month-long party for visiting fans.

Germany have won four World Cups and three European Championships but their stellar tournament reputation has been somewhat tarnished with a series of failures since their 2014 World Cup victory in Brazil.

They went out of the next two World Cups in the group stage, their worst showing in over 80 years, and exited the last Euros in the round of 16.

With the tournament on home soil, there is only one outcome that will satisfy Germany's fans, who are desperate for the success they once took for granted: winning the title.

Despite their 2022 World Cup disappointment, a string of terrible results since, including a 4-1 home defeat to Japan back in September, and a change of coach a month later, the Germans still have their eyes on the big prize.



Coach Julian Nagelsmann, who took over in October 2023, made that clear only days before the tournament. "The normal ambition: we want to win it," Nagelsmann said of the team's goal.

His team are banking on a mix of hugely talented young players, including Jamal Musiala and newly-crowned Bundesliga champion Florian Wirtz, and experienced veterans such as 2014 World Cup winners Manuel Neuer, Thomas Mueller, and Toni Kroos.

The big question remains their goal-scoring ability with Kai Havertz, far from a natural number nine, being their first-choice striker. Burly Borussia Dortmund forward Niclas Fuellkrug will be on the bench.

They will need to underline those big ambitions against the Scots, who

are playing in back-to-back European Championships for the first time since 1996.

Scotland, clear underdogs, are hoping for an early upset that could help guide them through the group stage for the first time in 11 international tournaments.

Apart from success on the pitch, the host country is also banking on a wave of enthusiasm from their own fans as well as an estimated 2.7 million visitors for the June 14-July 14 event.

Large fan zones have been set up across all major cities, including Berlin's massive fan space, stretching from the iconic Brandenburg gate far into the west of the city.

The fan zones were an overwhelming success during the 2006 World Cup in Germany, helping to fuel the party atmosphere of that tournament, dubbed locally the 'summer fairytale'.

Conditions are not quite the same this time, with more than one in four Germans having no interest in the Euros, and security being top of the agenda.

Thousands of police will be deployed around the clock in an attempt to head off potential threats from Islamists, hooligans, violent individuals, and cyberattacks.